Martyr

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Martyr

by det395

Summary

In Hannibal, Will sees someone who offers comfort and understanding. In Will, Hannibal sees someone who just might be his perfect victim.

Notes

because of rushing to post this for halloween, this is unbeta'd and largely unedited, so you have been warned! for a detailed list of triggers and character deaths you can click here. i just wanted to try something new, and in the season of horror and after watching a lot of slashers, apparently that means something completely depraved!

Chapter 1

Will falls asleep with his cheek pressed to a picture of a dead girl.

The girl in question has cuts over every inch of her body, zig-zagging across her pale white skin—inflicted prior to death—before she was dumped, naked, in a church in Cincinnati. Now the cuts on her body blur and shift where the wetness from Will's drool has water-damaged the photograph.

Will sits up almost completely before he realizes his mistake. He groans out loud and can immediately tell that something is out of place, a crick in his back that feels worse than his usual aches and pains. This job really is breaking him in more ways than one, and he doesn't want to have to deal with a hurt back on top of the lost time and this losing-his-mind deal.

He sulks in that spot for a while, staring dejectedly at the off-colour motel wall. He wants to be home with his dogs. He wants to not feel like this anymore.

There's a mandatory meeting at the local police station this morning. If Will's predictions are right, then Jack will be sending someone to retrieve him imminently.

The knock on the door comes less than a minute later and Will opens it stiffly. Seeing Hannibal behind the door fills him with more relief than he expected. If there is any saving grace to this trip, it's that Hannibal got invited to profile on this case, too. Maybe it's mostly just to watch over Will while his sanity slips away into lost time and fever dreams, but Will doesn't mind the attention right now.

"Please tell me we don't have to go right now," Will says.

Hannibal squeezes by him and just smiles as he pulls out some tupperware to place on the table. He takes one look at the open case files and then starts diligently cleaning it up, hiding the blood and gore and death away behind a folder, even going the extra step to place it in Will's bag. Out of sight, out of mind.

“Thanks,” Will mutters.

“Just how bad did you sleep?” Hannibal asks.

Will chuckles silently at the well diluted insult. He hasn’t looked in a mirror and he doesn’t want to. At least Hannibal doesn’t hide it when he’s appraising Will’s day-old outfit.

Just before Will goes to sit at the table, Hannibal hops up and grabs him by the shoulders. Will quickly tenses and closes in on himself, and only relaxes when Hannibal rubs a soothing hand up Will’s arm. It’s not soothing, but it does indicate to Will that he’s supposed to be soothed and relaxed, so he makes an effort to not look like a cornered cat.

The only other time he can recall Hannibal touching him was when Will learned the truth about Abigail killing Nicholas Boyle. A simple, heavy hand on his shoulder. And, he supposes, also on the day that it all began with Abigail when Hannibal peeled Will’s trembling arms off of her neck to save Abigail himself. Will isn’t sure why these memories of Hannibal touching him exist in his mind like a catalogue.

Well, maybe he does. But he doesn’t know why being touched by Hannibal has to seem like such a step above the rest, why Will’s skin tingles and his muscles turn to jelly when sated by Hannibal’s warm, sure touch.

His cheeks heat up and he stares forward, conceding to Hannibal’s observant gaze on his traitorous bodily processes.

Hannibal is respectful enough not to mention it, though Will still expects that one of these days he’ll get a therapy session to dig into his unhealthy attachment to his therapist.

“You hurt your back,” Hannibal says.

“I slept badly.”

“You slept sitting at this table,” Hannibal replies admonishingly. “Where does it hurt?”

Hannibal steps behind him and Will feels his heart pick up speed. He closes his eyes but Hannibal’s presence behind him is impossible to ignore. It fills the entire room.

“Where *doesn’t* it hurt?” Will says dismissively.

Hannibal puts a hand on his back and pulls back on his shoulder. Realizing that Hannibal isn’t going to let this go, he twists an arm behind his back to gesture to the middle of his back where everything is sore and tight.

“I don’t know what you think you can do about it,” Will says.

“Let’s see,” Hannibal says.

Hannibal grabs Will’s wrists and crosses them over Will’s chest, before hugging Will from behind. Any words leave Will’s mind.

“Relax,” Hannibal whispers in his ear, which feels impossible, but Hannibal squeezes him and tilts back, lifting Will’s feet off the ground and stretching his back more and more until there’s a sequence of popping noises.

Will lets out a loud sigh when his feet touch the ground again. The relief is immeasurable, his back is still sore but suddenly light like his spine has been filled with air, and he rolls his shoulders a few times to check it. He thinks that the tightness he’s felt for years even feels better.

“You might consider booking a chiropractor. Adjustments are a process.”

“Yeah, you taking patients?” Will asks, turning to face Hannibal, who is still uncomfortably close, but Will doesn’t take a step back.

“Unfortunately, I have only picked up a few moves, but I can exhaust them on you,” Hannibal says.

He picks up Will’s hand and cracks his fingers, one by one. Will cringes at the noises, and when Hannibal gets to his thumb and presses harder against his joint, Will yanks away with an “ow” and a genuine laugh that he can’t hold back. A playful kind of joy fills his chest when Hannibal goes after his other hand, crowding forward even as Will backs up until he feels his lower back hit the table.

“Okay, okay, I get it,” Will says, trying to pull out of his grip, but Hannibal cracks the rest of his fingers through Will’s wincing, *pop, pop, pop, pop, pop.*

“Don’t worry, I’m finished,” Hannibal says.

Hannibal’s hand lifts to his face and Will freezes but finds he’s more than okay with Hannibal trying to touch him more, until Hannibal tugs roughly on his ear, eliciting another *pop.*

“Ow, Christ, did you just crack my ear?” Will covers his ear and leans away.

“After that one,” Hannibal says, smiling smugly.

Will stretches out his fingers, half-worried that Hannibal messed something up, but it seems fine and he still continues to be surprised by how much he just seems to trust Hannibal.

He should bant back, he thinks, but words don’t come. He feels suddenly relaxed and he can’t help but wish Hannibal would reach out again. He wonders if it’s only him that thinks about how close they’ve gotten, how nice their meals together always seem to feel, or how easily they understand each other, whether it’s work-related or their senses of humour. There are

secrets between them now, a shared agreement to protect Abigail, and it feels nearly as intimate as any family ties that Will has had.

Maybe Hannibal fits this easily with a lot of people, but Will doesn't. It brings up a feeling of possessiveness that Will hasn't felt since a few attachments he had when he was younger and more concerned with his loneliness. It feels like Hannibal should be his *person* . Not anyone else. He wants Hannibal to feel like Will is the only one that can understand him, too, almost desperately.

Will frowns, and Hannibal tilts his head questionably. He doesn't want to think that he's actually in love with Hannibal. What might some psychologist say? That Will hasn't ever felt so taken care of as he has with Hannibal, and he's as vulnerable as he's ever been with this sickness and stress, and so he must have latched on? Whether his attachment is because of his heart or his weak psyche, it feels far more intense than he has any right to feel.

He's been quiet for far too long, and Hannibal doesn't fill the silence. It's even worse that Hannibal just lets him pine, although sometimes he still questions Hannibal's fondness, like right now, as Hannibal meets his unwavering gaze with an inscrutable expression.

Two loud knocks on the door make him jump and step away. He quickly opens the door, almost grateful for the distraction before he sees Jack.

"There's another body. We gotta go now."

"I need a few minutes, Jack," Will says, slumping where he stands. He wants to crawl into his bed and stay there all day. He maybe wants Hannibal to crawl into bed with him. Neither seem very likely to happen any time soon.

"Well, make it quick. I'll text the details." He nods at Hannibal and then hurries on, buzzing with stress and tension.

Will turns back to Hannibal, shutting the door. Their breakfast is ruined and Will can't look at Hannibal anymore. He quickly walks past him to get in the shower while Hannibal packs up their food again.

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The nighttime finds him in Hannibal's motel room with a half-pint of whiskey that he picked up from the liquor store. He pours himself a couple more fingers into a paper cup.

"You agree with me, though, don't you?" Will asks.

"I think it is very possible, but what is the evidence? What's different with this one?" Hannibal leans forward, clasping his hands together.

"The first victim had wounds layered over partially healed wounds, days, *weeks,* of torture, this one was just all in one day, a rushed imitation of that brutality. And why was he crucified and not the girl? Or why not the ones dumped in Baltimore, Virginia, New York that had all dealt with weeks of torture, too? Like that second one they found—the man missing limbs *and* his heart. Not to mention most of his skin." Will stands up so he can pace back and forth, as if raising his heartbeat could somehow speed up his brain.

"Why couldn't it be this killer escalating, moving faster and adding another element?"

"Faster torture isn't an escalation for this sadist, it's *mercy* . Being held captive while being tortured was too important of an element for the first victim, the killer was too committed to step down so drastically. It makes no sense, the first victim deserved to be crucified more than this one, but she was dumped like a toy that didn't work out. It… it's like Cassie Boyle, like showing the negative so I can see the positive."

"You say that like it's obvious, why would the first one deserve it more?" Hannibal questions before Will can stew on that thought for too long.

Will hesitates, half shrugging. "She went through more."

“So she’s like a martyr?”

Will thinks over that for a moment. “Actually, you might be onto something there. She suffers, and then… well she *should* have been the one to be crucified since she suffered more. But she was still dumped in a church at least. Maybe this new victim is just a message. Maybe he wants me… the police to understand him.” *Maybe this guy is the copycat? And why does he care about me so much?*

“It’s very possible that he wants you specifically to understand him. Someone reading the news could easily come to the impression that you’re the best profiler out there—and they would be correct.”

Will shakes his head but doesn’t know how to reply without sounding either dismissive or cocky. Hannibal smiles amusedly like he knows Will can’t dispute it.

Will turns so he doesn’t have to look at that smile. He looks into his whiskey instead. Then looks at the bottle to check if he really drank that much. He takes another sip and wishes he had been keeping track of how much Hannibal drank.

He spent all day fighting with local officers and almost equally idiotic fellow FBI officers about how he thinks this body came from the same killer but with a completely different MO. Even Jack, who usually eats up what he says, looked at him skeptically over whether this victim was really that different from the last.

Once again, though, Hannibal has been on the same page as him. He understands.

Will sits back down on the couch.

“Well, maybe we can put out a message for him. If the other officers agree. If not, it won’t be my fault if another poor soul gets tortured and crucified by some maniac.”

Hannibal doesn't reply and when Will looks over, he's just looking at Will. It's too warm in this room, and now too quiet.

"I feel I must suggest that there's little else we can do tonight and that we should both rest," Hannibal says. "I'd also like to offer to tell Jack that I am strongly suggesting that you get to sleep in if there is no other emergency."

Will spent all day wanting to go home and go to bed, but now that he's alone with Hannibal, he finds he doesn't want to be anywhere else.

"Doctors orders?" he asks a little weakly.

"Exactly that."

"Yeah, you're probably right." Will drinks the last of his whiskey in a large gulp and then pushes himself up.

Hannibal walks him to the door and Will forces a goodbye-grin as he shoves on his jacket. Hannibal reaches out, grabs his hand, and cracks his thumb like he did in the morning.

Will laughs, half-heartedly yanking his hand away. Hannibal smiles back playfully. For such a serious and well-adjusted man, Will feels lucky that he can see something different underneath the veneer of professionalism.

There's a click and suddenly all the lights turn out. For a moment, Will can see nothing at all, but his eyes quickly start to adjust to the dim sky through the window.

"Don't want any bugs attracted to the lights in here," Hannibal mumbles, opening the door for Will.

Will stands frozen on the spot. Maybe it's the whiskey or maybe he's not imagining the energy between them, but he can't bring himself to move either way. It's dark and his brain feels numb and Hannibal is a lot closer than he needs to be, enough that Will can smell his cologne and feel his breath on his face. It feels safer in the dark, like the world is a different place.

Hannibal waits, and it feels purposeful. Instead of leaving through the open door like he should, Will reaches out and pulls himself close to Hannibal, pressing his face against the side of Hannibal's head, hair tickling his nose when he breathes in.

Will clings, and slowly, Hannibal puts his hands up on his back and Will isn't quite sure who started this.

Hannibal smells nice. Expensive aftershave—something that definitely doesn't have a ship on a bottle, he thinks, smiling to himself. He feels his eyes grow a little watery. It's been so long since he's had close contact with another person, and he doesn't know if he's ever felt this way for someone before Hannibal, which is strange, because he doesn't even really know him that well. He has known about his attraction to men since he was young, and worried that his comparable disinterest in women meant that his orientation was rather single-focused, but he never fully acted on his desires. It feels like years of repression are bubbling up and he's probably making a fool of himself now.

"I'm sorry, this isn't professional," Will mutters, starting to pull back.

Hannibal holds him tighter. "It's okay, Will," he whispers. It's all Will needs to press his face back into Hannibal's neck.

"I can't get you out of my head," Will whispers, gliding a hand up into Hannibal's hair. And it's true, Hannibal seems to exist like an itch under his skin these days, something he can't help but need. He can barely focus on his work anymore, his free time suddenly blurred by a million different idealistic daydreams. Recently, a hand down his pants has been the distraction he needs to stay sane, but it's not quite enough.

Will turns his head, skimming his lips against Hannibal's stubble, trying to line up their mouths for good, but Hannibal catches his face in his hands.

“Jack is just through the wall,” Hannibal whispers.

“Come to my room, then.”

Hannibal pauses, and then cups his jaw and says, “Let me take you out when we are back home. I don’t want to have you for the first time in a place like this, not now.”

Will breathes out, a bit shakily. “Of course you’re particular about these things.”

He can’t see but he can sense the smile on Hannibal’s face. Even in his imagination, Hannibal is the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen. He touches his high cheekbone with his fingertips and drags his hand down to his neck before Hannibal can kick him out.

“Goodnight, Will,” Hannibal says, and then nudges him outside before closing the motel door.

Will stands in the same spot staring at the door for a few long moments before he walks down the wooden walkway of the cheap motel, a bit numb and unsure of what just happened. It sounded like reciprocation, though, undoubtedly, and like something good might actually happen to him when he’s back in Virginia.

He curls up in the cold motel bed with a buzzing anticipation that won’t settle. On top of that, is a strange uncertainty that he can’t quite shake. Hannibal would probably tell him that he’s just not used to good things happening to him. Will just has to believe that that isn’t true; he *deserves* something good to happen to him. And that good thing just might be Hannibal.

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They’re at the airport a day later. Hannibal and Will leave Jack and the other agents behind, citing the obligations that require them back home imminently, including Hannibal’s

psychiatric practice and Will's dogs, respectively. There's little Will can do out here before another body drops, anyway.

Will crowds behind Hannibal in a coffee shop lineup—one that Hannibal led Will to the other side of the airport for, passing four Starbuck's on their trek. When Will pulls out his wallet, Hannibal pushes his hand down.

"Please, let me get yours," Hannibal says. The barista looks stressed staring at the lineup behind them so Will doesn't argue with Hannibal's manners. He can barely hear himself speak through the buzzing anticipation in his mind.

He brings it up when they're waiting at the counter for their orders, too impatient to put it off any more than they have this morning.

"If you're using the whiskey to excuse away the events of last night, then please let me know before I say anything too embarrassing because I'd like to call dibs on that excuse, too."

Hannibal huffs a silent laugh. "I had very little whiskey last night, actually," he says.

"Considering the nearly empty bottle, that means I had far too much. But I really didn't need the whiskey to do or say what I did," Will says.

Hannibal grins. "I know."

Will scoffs. "You don't need a degree in psychiatry to pick up on my hints."

Their orders arrive and Hannibal leads him to a table with a hand on his lower back, which is a new move that makes Will straighten his back.

"So," Will says when they sit down. "Are you going to take me out?"

“I said I would, didn’t I?”

“You said you would take me out when we’re back.”

“Then have dinner with me tonight.”

Will smiles smugly.

“I don’t quite mean what I said, though. I don’t want to take you anywhere, I want to bring you over and cook for you.”

“Yes, I could have guessed that.” Will sits back and sips his coffee. “It’s not inappropriate to do this with a patient?”

Hannibal pauses and gives him a knowing look. “Are you implying that we haven’t just been having conversations this entire time?”

Will smiles smugly. He likes it very much that Hannibal doesn’t care.

The rest of their travel home is rather quiet until they part ways. Will’s head starts pounding until he can barely keep his eyes open, let alone form sentences. He sees Hannibal staring at the amount of Aspirin he takes but he doesn’t comment on anything.

Lost time now is less of a shock and more of a quiet dread. His gut clenches as he looks around at his new surroundings, and he only relaxes slightly when he recognizes that he made it home. He makes sure his watch is right every morning and carries a pocketbook calendar. He’s home, he’s with his dogs, and if he rushes, he won’t miss dinner with Hannibal. Nothing feels quite right when this happens—which is more and more frequently—but he showers, dresses, sprays cologne, and then gets ready to leave anyway.

“Sorry guys, I’ll spend time with you soon,” Will says, offering a few pats to his dogs' heads as he squeezes out the front door without letting them go loose.

He makes it to Hannibal’s place right on time but still feels off. He considered cancelling and turning around at every half-mile but kept on going solely because he thinks if anyone could ground him, it would probably be Hannibal. He feels sickly and unsettled but he wipes the sweat off his forehead and walks up to the door and knocks.

“Will. Please, come in, you’re just in time.”

Will ducks in and a cool hand instantly reaches his forehead. He doesn’t pull back because it feels nice against his clammy skin. Hannibal tilts his head.

“Let’s play a game where we pretend I’m not dying or going insane for the night,” Will says.

“If you insist. I’ll return to fretting another time.”

“You can dote on me now if you’d really like.”

Hannibal helps Will out of his coat and then leads him inside. “Dinner is almost ready, I just need to plate it.”

“Do you want help?”

“No. I’m doting, aren’t I? You may start with some wine.”

He pulls out his chair and then pours some red wine into Will’s glass, twisting the decanter to stop the rich liquid from dripping below.

Will drinks half of his glass. He knows it's a bad idea because he didn't eat today but he wants to feel a buzz to get rid of his nerves and embarrassment over being so sick. It might not show on the outside, but he hates feeling this weak.

Hannibal returns, announcing the food as *Heart Confit with Sous Vide Beets* and running his hand across the back of Will's neck before sitting down at the head of the table.

"Heart?" Will comments with raised eyebrows. "I don't think I've ever tried heart before."

"With your father as a young boy, did you only fish? It is my understanding that it is tradition for hunters to eat the hearts of their first kills."

"I don't think that's as common as you think," Will says quickly. He can't get rid of the sudden image in his mind of Abigail biting into a raw heart, blood dripping down her chin. He takes a bite and tries not to feel sick at the burst of liquid in his mouth.

"Surely some still practice. It is believed that by eating the heart, the hunter will then possess the positive traits of that which they just hunted, such as agility or bravery."

"What positive traits did this animal have then?"

"Many, to be frank. I always choose my cuts carefully and get to know the animal before slaughter. Do you not like it?" Hannibal's eyes turn down to his plate.

"No, no, it's good. My appetite just hasn't been the same."

Hannibal nods once. "This heart we're eating—she was an undeniably kind soul. Gentle with all. More intelligent than most. But a bit naive on account of those traits. Of course, being on the other side of the wall from the wild means one never has to learn those instincts."

Will chews slowly, not entirely sure how to respond. He feels tired, actually. Maybe he should have stayed home to rest, except usually, he can last for days at a time without sleep.

“I can’t say I believe that eating someone’s heart will transfer those traits,” Hannibal continues. “But it changes us in other ways.”

“Someone?” Will asks, but with the way his voice echoes through his head, he’s not entirely sure he said it out loud. He takes another sip of wine to keep his hand busy because he thinks he might be sick if he took another bite.

Hannibal doesn’t acknowledge him either way. “What you eat changes how you think, at the very basic processes of your mind.”

Will’s heart starts beating faster, drowning out Hannibal’s voice with its beating crescendo. Something is off. Maybe he’s having another relapse. Maybe he should have stayed home with his dogs. Maybe he should ask Hannibal to take him to the hospital.

“...and sometimes there are other additional chemicals, too,” he hears. The back of Will’s neck prickles and his mouth fills with bile. A wave of dizziness makes him sway where he sits.

“Hannibal, did you drug the food?” Will asks, letting his eyes flutter shut.

“Will, I would never do that to the food.” Hannibal reaches out to gently smooth the placemat where Will starts clutching it. “The wine on the other hand…”

All of his cutlery and fine china go flying when Will falls off of his chair with a grasp still around the fabric. Wine and vegetables and juice from the meat cover him and glass shatters in his face. He’s almost certain that he blacks out because Hannibal is suddenly on the other side of him, but Will finds it somewhere in him to get a second wind and push up on his elbows, which is when something yanks him by the hair. Hannibal pulls him almost entirely to standing, ripping out strands at the crown of his head surely, and then pushes him down far enough that Will can just barely walk. Will stumbles as he tries to fight back and hit Hannibal in the groin, but another painful yank makes him miss. He changes strategy and tries to get

some leverage by gaining balance but in the next moment, the floor below him disappears completely.

Hannibal drags him down a staircase and everything goes dark, but Will thinks he still has some consciousness because he feels the stairs knocking bruises into his legs and hips and he's almost certain that he's still struggling and fighting, hitting fists and kicking out his legs.

The wind gets knocked out of him when Hannibal pushes him face-first onto the floor of the basement. Hannibal might be sitting on his chest for how much pressure is suddenly on his lungs, but he can't rule out the possibility that it's just panic. His best chance of escape might be right now before—

Metallic clanging and something cold and hard against his skin confirm his fear, but no matter how much struggling he does, Hannibal has him pinned down enough that he can slip on his chains, first onto each wrist, and then, to Will's dismay, around his neck. He opens his mouth and tries to find something to bite but his face just presses against the hard, cold floor. He tries to kick but his body barely twitches. The weight finally leaves his chest and he loses against the fight of unconsciousness. Fading footsteps is the last thing he can recall.

Chapter 2

There is music playing in his dreams. Deep piano reverberating, chasing him, and then falling away again at the next second. It’s almost worse when the noise disappears and he doesn’t know if it’s going to return, or where. He’s lost in a maze of dark hallways with the same paintings at each turn. The noise surrounds him as he turns another corner and then he finds he’s been running toward the music instead.

He wakes up spasming rather violently, and he can't tell if it's out of pain or fear. Everything hurts. The crick in his back, the bruises littering his legs when he moves, and sharp pain in his wrists and ankles and neck. It’s so cold in this room that he’s certain his bones will snap if he tries to move them, and he seems to only be wearing underwear. He wonders if it’s all because he slept wrong but then the sharp sensation tugs up at his throat and wrists and drags his whole body across the floor.

The music is real, he suddenly realizes, filling the room just loud enough to be jarring.

He lets out a choking noise and tries to grab the thing squeezing his neck, but his wrists are pulled away forcefully. It pulls and pulls, tightening and cutting into his skin and fighting gravity until his butt lifts off the ground and he can finally stand up and take some of the pressure off from the tugging chains.

Panting heavily, he finally opens his eyes, and then quickly squeezes them shut again. It’s still a dream. It can’t be Hannibal here in front of him. Flowers. He smells fresh flowers. He’s not here, after all. He must be outside somewhere and that would explain how cold it is right now. Except it’s not the season for flowers, so he must be in the hospital, and Alana brought him flowers. Kind, gentle, intelligent Alana. That would explain why Hannibal is here visiting him, too. It just wouldn’t explain why Will is chained to the wall.

He opens his eyes to face reality. Chamber music, the smell of fresh flowers, and Hannibal.

Will tugs on his restraints but there’s no budging. He leans back against the wall and shakes his head.

“You’re supposed to ask for consent first, you know,” Will says drearily. As he speaks he realizes how dry his throat is and how thirsty he’s gotten.

Hannibal just observes him with a slight tilt of his head like Will is a specimen in a zoo, and not a victim chained up in his basement.

“Are you going to explain anything or are you just going to kill me?” Will asks. “I’d love a villain monologue right now.”

Hannibal smiles and it looks heartbreakingly normal for a second. This Hannibal in front of him should be talking to him and setting him free and tenderly dressing his wounds. Will’s heart pangs with the desire to ask for help, but he stops himself. He wouldn’t be here right now if that Hannibal was real, and he refuses to beg to this man.

The stranger in front of him steps back and grabs two chains that are hanging down from the ceiling. Will follows them up to the pulley system made up of two wheels and above Will’s head until it comes down and connects to him, one chain splitting to the restraints on his wrists and another that goes around his neck.

When the chain pulls through the pulley system, it makes a tinkling noise that reminds him of working on his car, of the padlock on his barn, and of tying up his dogs on a camping trip. This chain yanks violently and Will goes flying.

The restraint around his neck tightens with his body weight when his feet lift up off the ground. He scrapes his heels against the wall but can’t gain purchase to take off any weight. It’s only when he pulls up on his arms, shifting the weight to his shackled wrists, that he can let up some of the tightness and take in some air to his lungs. His muscles burn with the effort and he keeps slipping and unintentionally tightening the restraint around his neck with his jerking. He manages to twist his wrist around and get his fists around the chains which helps only slightly.

Fresh flowers, chamber music, his good friend Hannibal. The man who he, deep inside somewhere, couldn’t help but think might be the *one* for him. Footsteps come closer and he thinks of the folders of documents and crime scene photos, long symmetrical cuts and flesh stab wounds. He thrashes until Hannibal holds him still by pressing on his stomach with one hand.

He tenses up at the sharp pain that digs in right below the chain on his neck. It moves down the centre of his chest, through his sternum and sends warm blood down to the skin on his stomach. Will groans and whimpers but the cutting doesn't stop until it's nearly at his belly button. Will breathes out when the blade lifts and he catches a glimpse of the dripping scalpel before it moves to his shoulder. It cuts down his right arm next. He shakes with the pain and the effort of holding himself up.

"At least tell me why," he says in a gasp. He wants to slow Hannibal down, but Hannibal doesn't even hesitate at Will's words, instead running the blade all the way down to his wrist. He moves to his other arm next, drawing a similar line in Will's blood there, as if it were of utmost importance that his torture be symmetrical. Hannibal is precise with his pressure, too, just hard enough to cut through his layers of skin.

Will gasps out a whimper that sounds more pathetic than he was hoping. Tears leak out of the side of his eyes. He considers himself to have a higher tolerance for pain than most, but this slow and unrelenting pain is overwhelming, and so is the realization that it's only the beginning. The scalpel cuts through his skin so easily that he barely realizes he's being cut until it explodes in pain. The more he loses strength and blood the more the restraint tightens around his neck until he's wheezing for air. His lungs burn and he kicks out desperately, only hitting the end of the line on his leg restraints and bruising his ankles.

The scalpel moves to his hips next, scratching parallel lines above the bone that cause more tears to fill his eyes.

"Stop," He finally gasps out. He doesn't want to sink to begging, but he will if it works.

It doesn't work. Hannibal doesn't even acknowledge him, acting as if Will was merely an inanimate canvas to mark his art upon.

Perhaps the craziest thing is that the one person he would most want to save him from this situation and comfort him and wrap his bandages is the same person who is doing this to him. A different kind of sob reaches his throat. It feels like grief.

“Hannibal,” he gasps out. The cutting doesn’t stop. The music still blares and Hannibal, still acting impersonal, kneels down to carve into his thighs and then his kneecaps with the scalpel. Will groans.

If he wants any chance of getting out of here, he needs to figure Hannibal out. He has to go back over the past few months and consider who Hannibal really is, all he knows about him. He needs to consider that everything they had together was probably fake. He needs to align Hannibal with the serial killer he now is certain he is.

Anger boils up and he’s almost grateful to finally reach this necessary emotion. Anger feels much better than the heartbreak from before.

“I’m going to kill you,” Will seethes out, having to take in wheezing gasps to stay afloat. Even though he still feels breathless, he forces out more words: “Even if it’s the last thing I do… I’ll kill you.”

Hannibal doesn’t stop for even a second and Will’s body jerks at particularly painful cuts right over his knee. His blood is dripping on the floor faster and faster, and like some sick joke from the universe, or maybe entirely part of Hannibal’s design, the music grows more frantic along with it.

Hannibal’s design, Hannibal’s design… he needs to crack it, he needs to understand to fight him.

Will loses the strength to hold himself up and the chain tightens painfully around his neck until he can’t breathe at all. He jerks and the need for air grows greater than the need to stop the pain, but he can no longer hold himself up. He’s pretty sure he’s bleeding from the restraints digging into his wrists already.

His mind flips through hypoxia and hypovolemic shock and fractures of the hyoid and damage to the larynx and he’s sure one of them is going to do him in within the next few minutes. And then the cutting stops. Will stares straight forward, unsure if he’s imagining it or if he’s already unconscious, but he can still see the blurry room in front of him.

Hannibal walks a few feet away and Will wonders if it's over. He still can't breathe and everything starts to go a little blurry around the edges. Hannibal grabs a small cooler and then walks back to Will with the scalpel in hand and Will has a bad feeling about this.

His bets start going to hypovolemic shock when the scalpel digs into the side of his thigh much deeper than before, digging out the muscle. He can't scream but his mouth and eyes spread out as if he were wailing. He's going to die, he's going to succumb to the darkness blurring at his vision, but the worst of the pain eventually stops. He feels the piece of his flesh being pulled out and dropped into the cooler.

Will's eyes droop as Hannibal steps away again and takes the chain off the stopper abruptly. Will's eyes pop open again as the chains get let go and he falls to the ground, smashing his ankle across the floor with a startling *crack.*

He collapses with the rattling chains falling around him. He quickly fights to loosen the restraint around his neck so he can gasp in some air. It's mostly solid metal but it has a chain that tightens when pulled like those cruel dog leashes he's seen. What he wouldn't do to have his dogs come and lick his face right now.

He curls up and trembles and breathes in fast bursts to get oxygen into his lungs.

Hannibal walks away but returns after just a few minutes. He turns down the music but doesn't turn it all the way off. He lifts Will up, gently, so he can sit back against the wall.

He starts to wash at Will's body with a damp rag, mostly wiping the blots of blood off of him and onto the floor. He takes out a bandage and wraps it tightly around the spot where he took a chunk out of Will's leg. Will winces as he applies a cream that Will guesses is an antibiotic. Hurting Will and then caring for the same wounds that he inflicted.

"You broke my ankle, too," Will says, his voice croaky and weak from the asphyxiation. He hates that he wants more care, but this is the first sign of comfort he's gotten and he can't help but crave it.

“So it is,” Hannibal says. Will had stopped expecting a reply and it’s jarring to hear Hannibal’s smooth accent again. Will always thought his voice was one of the most attractive things about him, and it had the unique power to make Will relax almost entirely into a stupor after listening to him speak for a while. It makes this feel more real, and it makes him ache with missing the Hannibal he thought he knew.

Hannibal doesn’t wrap up his ankle, nor does he wrap up any of the other open wounds. Will reckons he only wrapped up the one on his thigh because it was deep enough to make him bleed to death, and he realizes that the comfort he receives in Hannibal’s captivity is going to be very limited. No infections, no bleeding out, and he reckons he’d be able to suffocate to unconsciousness but not to death. Extended captivity is too important to Hannibal’s design. He knows this.

He is almost certain that Hannibal is the serial killer that they have been looking for. He has studied those case files and crime scene photos and crime scenes *in the flesh* enough to know the brutality of the torture. Experienced police officers vomited in the grass and were sent home before they could contaminate the scene anymore. Price and Zeller barely cracked any jokes as they explained just how much mutilation was done antemortem. Still, Will knows this killer more than anyone. Meaning Will knows *Hannibal* more than anyone, and he still doesn’t know him at all. He does know that he’d rather be taken hostage by almost any other serial killer he’s studied, and that’s saying something.

Hannibal pulls out a pill bottle and a bottle of water.

“You have Anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis. This is for your treatment,” Hannibal says simply.

Hannibal goes to put the pill in Will’s mouth and Will lurches forward at his first chance bites down on Hannibal’s hand as hard as he can.

As quick as can be, Hannibal plugs his nose and kneels on his broken ankle. Will screams out, the sound echoing through the room and Hannibal puts the pill at the back of his throat then pulls his hand out.

“Drink,” he commands calmly, holding the bottle of water to Will’s lips. Will coughs up the pill from his throat and then spits it at Hannibal.

“Well then,” Hannibal says, and pulls a long tube out of the bag he has.

Will shakes his head but stops himself from begging for another chance. Punishing disobedience to succumb a victim to passivity and compliance—it’s the oldest trick in the book and one of the basic survival methods humans have learned from evolution, and Will is determined not to give in, no matter how bad things get. Hannibal might kill him after all, but Will *can* deny him his satisfaction.

He’s starting to question his decision when Hannibal tilts Will’s head back and starts to force the tube in. Will chokes when it barely gets behind his teeth and then it keeps on going, and going, and it feels like there’s no way this will fit, but it’s forced down anyway, burning along each millimetre of his throat. He couldn’t tilt his head down if he tried with the stiff rod forced into his throat. He can feel it in his esophagus and travelling impossibly further into places he’s never wanted to feel sensation in before, and all the while he chokes back and tears stream down his face. Hannibal wipes the tears away casually and Will glares at him as best as he can.

When it seems to be down far enough, Hannibal plops the single pill down into the tube and it falls down easily, circling around the tube briefly like one of those donation coin funnels.

Pulling it out is just as bad, and Will chokes the entire time. He pants in relief when it’s finally out.

Will stares longingly at the water bottle. If he had taken the pill the first time, Hannibal would have let him wash it down with water and soothe his parched throat. He realizes how desperately thirsty he's gotten just as Hannibal packs the water back into his bag.

Hannibal zips up his bag with the last of his supplies in it. Will suddenly finds a new fear squirming up his chest and into his throat: the fear of being left alone. He wants Hannibal to stay with him. He wants Hannibal. He can’t stop wanting Hannibal. He *hates* it.

Hannibal puts his bag to the side and then looks Will in the eyes for the very first time. Will freezes. Warm, golden eyes full of depths that Will apparently hadn’t even come close to guessing the extent of after spending months nearly falling into them.

Hannibal pushes his hair out of his face and then puts his hands on either side of Will's face, stroking the tears from his cheeks and scratching at the nape of his neck. Will nearly whimpers for a different reason. It feels overwhelming to have such a nice sensation after experiencing so much pain.

"You did exceptionally well for your first time, as I expected you would. I have much hope for you, Will."

Hannibal smiles, kisses his forehead sweetly, and then stands and leaves Will, gawking and full of conflicted emotions, alone in the dark.

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He foregoes his modesty and strips off his boxers to wrap it around his throbbing ankle, which is difficult with the metal restraints in the way.

The ankle restraints connect to the wall while the wrist and neck ones raise to the ceiling's pulley system. Will tugs on them halfheartedly but he sincerely doubts that Hannibal would make a dumb mistake like loose screws. He tries to pull them over his body parts but they're just tight enough to be impossible to budge.

He pulls himself along the floor, gritting his teeth against the pain of tugging his cuts and injuries across the cement ground to see how far he can go. The chains tinkle across the floor and then grow taut and he's about in the middle of the room, where he takes in his surroundings, what little there is.

In the unlit room he can make out a staircase going upstairs, so he's still in the basement. Near the door is a table with a record player on it and some flowers, but it's so dark that he sees them in grayscale. Either he's gotten used to the smell or the metallic scent of blood is drowning out the fresh smell.

There's another container also chained to the wall, with handles and some designs on the side and he's pretty sure it's a traditional chamber pot, because even the place that Will shits needs to match some aesthetic apparently. He considers the thought of just making a mess of the place instead, or throwing his feces at Hannibal like some monkey in a cage, but he can't seem to build up enough spite to find any joy in the thoughts.

He spends a while trying to get into a comfortable position, shifting the restraints away from where they're digging into his skin and curling up to preserve some heat. The flow of blood to his injuries warms his skin briefly as his body fights infection but the loss of blood overall will make him colder in the end. Still, he opts for staying still to avoid hurting himself any further. He props his broken ankle on his other leg so it's slightly elevated.

Now it's time to plan before he suffers many more injuries. He doesn't have that much self-preservation, but he has things to live for. His dogs depend on him. He has a job where he saves lives. There's Abigail, too, and she's in danger knowing Hannibal. It's the thought of Hannibal most of all that gets his blood pumping with motivation. He wants revenge, he wants *justice,* for all of the lies and deception and for pretending like he cared about Will only to wind him up like a toy and then smash him against the wall. For putting Will in this beyond-fucked-up path and already scarring and maiming him past the point of return.

What does he know about Hannibal? What is there about him that is indisputably him? He has a mind for aesthetics and flair, he enjoys art and fine dining and pretty things, he's widely read and educated and skilled. He is socially competent but likely not genuinely close to anyone. He has a dark sense of humour, and he probably does a lot of things for his own twisted amusement.

Being a sadist doesn't quite seem to explain everything. Will frowns, running through a list of diagnoses in his head. It's all so inadequate. His mind seems more likely to connect Hannibal to the image of a monster, hooves stepping by…

What *need* does he serve by killing, if it is even a need? Will's torture was mostly simple, his ankle an accident but one that didn't earn him a second glance, but the deep cut out of his flesh—Will's mouth salivates at the thought and he feels suddenly nauseous.

He lets out a strange chuckle. Of course. *Someone.* Hannibal will eat his flesh, he is certain of it. But that still doesn't describe everything.

He slips into unconsciousness thinking about it, and his dreams become plagued with Hannibal, and then with something that isn't a man steps into his room towering over him, the shadow of antlers growing in length at each step, and he's not quite sure what's real anymore.

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The second time that Hannibal comes, he pulls up the chain to choke and hang Will and then slices over the cuts that haven't even stopped bleeding yet, before dropping him onto his bad ankle again. The third time, he does it all again, except Will doesn't have the strength to keep from suffocating and he falls unconscious and then wakes up in a heap on the floor. The fourth time, he lets himself scream until there's no air left and then passes out even faster.

Shallow cuts cover nearly every part of him now. They are precise and symmetrical and overlapping with no hesitation even on the most sensitive parts of him.

He hadn't felt too hesitant with his nudity since it felt better to use his little fabric he had to tie up his broken ankle, but when he was strung up he realized just how vulnerable it felt. He hoped and begged silently—Hannibal had put the underwear on him so surely it wasn't part of his design—but his eyes bulged out almost comically when Hannibal cut short nicks on his genitals, too.

Everything hurts. Shifting around, getting to the chamber pot, breathing, each unintentional twitch, and even just simply laying still, it all hurts as if there are still a thousand knives sticking against him.

After each torture, Hannibal briskly washes him up, impersonal rather than tender like he might have been before. Except he *is* tender, afterward when he praises Will. For what, he isn't quite sure, because Will isn't *doing* anything, but the praise almost feels appropriate since he's not quite sure how he's surviving this pain, either. Hannibal puts his hands on either side of his face and strokes along parts of his skin and scalp that haven't been cut, and for those few seconds, he looks into Will's eyes and Will feels human again, and Hannibal seems human again, too. Hannibal looks adoring and it sparks something that Will doesn't want to want anymore. Hannibal says he's done an *exceptional* job and Will, though it makes no sense, can't help but almost agree.

The fifth time that Hannibal comes down, Will starts shaking his head before Hannibal can get to him. He isn't sure if it makes any difference or if Hannibal simply follows his own plan, but he doesn't lift up the chains this time. He turns Will onto his stomach, kneels gently over his hips, and starts slicing into his back where he hadn't been able to reach when Will was chained up against the wall. The last place that Will was able to lay, a clean canvas to paint with his blood.

Will twitches, sometimes unintentionally as a response to the pain, and sometimes because he's trying to fight, but he has no strength left to move more than a few inches. He's lost too much blood, his adrenaline is spent, he's dehydrated beyond all belief, and his stomach is empty, though the dehydration probably overshadows the full extent of his starvation.

This time, the torture seems to last for much longer, but he admits to himself that time doesn't mean much anymore. He refuses to believe that Hannibal comes down once a day, but he would be horrified to learn that it's been less than a day held captive. He only relieved himself once, but he also hasn't been given fluids. The dehydration would probably be even more serious after days. The times he sleeps, he's almost certain that he doesn't fall completely into unconsciousness, and most times it feels like he's only been laying down for a few minutes. He tries counting to get something to relate the stretch of time to. *One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi, four Mississippi, five Mississippi, six Mississippi, seven Mississippi one cut done across the top of his thigh*…. He stops counting, for fear that he'll do the math and realize that Hannibal has been carving into his backside for hours, pinning him against the cold ground. He always thought that pain would become numb eventually, but it feels almost worse. He's so tired of it.

All he needs to do is get out of his chains and get out of the basement, and then he can find his way through Hannibal's house. In his mind, he runs through the doors he could leave through and the possible windows he can smash if they are locked from the inside. He recalls the neighbours he's seen: the rich woman with the baby next door, she must have been a stay-at-home mom. It's his best chance. He just needs to get there.

He could dislocate his thumbs to pull his hands free, but he'd need to smash the bones in his foot for a chance to get out of those. They might be halfway there, anyway. He's almost certain his other ankle is at least sprained, if not fractured. The real issue is the heavy restraint around his neck. He'll have to saw through it or pick the lock. Then, he'll have to climb up the stairs and pick *that* lock.

He twitches when the cloth comes to clean him up, not prepared for something that doesn't sting. Hannibal helps him up, though Will can't sit back where there are too many cuts from his feet to the back of his head.

Hannibal brushes his hair out of his face and wipes his tears and crust of old saliva.

"You did excellent, Will. I've gone much harder on you than anyone else I have done this to, but only because I know you can take it. And you do, very well."

Will squeezes his eyes shut, and wants to say, *I'm not taking it,* but his throat is too dry.

"It doesn't have to go on forever, and it is up to you in the end. All will become clear eventually."

Hannibal packs up his things and Will settles back down on the floor.

"Just a little while longer to endure and sit with the pain," Hannibal says. "The next time I come down here, you will get a break, and I hope you will be happy to know I will give you some answers, too."

Before Hannibal can even leave the room, Will falls unconscious into his deepest sleep yet.

Chapter 3

It seems dangerous to hold onto hope that he will be given a real break, and, he prays, some water too, but he can't quite help it.

Hannibal's footsteps still make him flinch and he braces for pain instinctively at his proximity. He tries to lock up his muscles in case the chains yank him up, but he can't quite find the strength to do it. All he can think about is water, and then he sees a glass in front of him.

He looks up in disbelief and then lets Hannibal sit him up so he can chug it back. Hannibal takes it away too fast and he yanks at his chains trying to grab the glass again.

"I will give you all the water you want, Will, I just need to give it to you slowly so you don't get sick."

Will laughs dryly and then coughs. "Oh, so you care about me throwing up water? Don't want me to feel uncomfortable, do you?"

"I told you, I'm giving you a break. Here, have more."

Will still feels thirsty after finishing the glass. He looks up at Hannibal with wide eyes.

"I will let you have more water, but first I will take you to a more comfortable place." Hannibal lifts up a syringe. "Apologies, but for efficiency, I will need to give you this. You will feel a pinch."

Will shakes his head but Hannibal holds his arm tight. The pinch feels like nothing compared to the cuts that cover his body, and slowly he slips into blackness again.

When Will wakes again, he squints through the sudden brightness. He shifts hesitantly, worried about aggravating his injuries, but he feels… okay. Drowsy and a bit out of it, but physically, rather free of pain. There's a strange sensation on his leg that he feels only distantly.

He blinks and then looks down and freezes. It was difficult to see in the dark, but here the sun illuminates a hundred stark red cuts across his body. Not only that, but Harley is here, and he is *licking* some of his cuts. When Will stirs, Buster stands up from where he was laying on the floor next to Will's chair and pants excitedly up at Will. The jingle of collars makes him turn, and he sees Jack and Zoe. Zoe tries to jump up on his chair, and then a shadow falls over her. Will follows its shape and Hannibal stands before him, raising his eyebrows once before bending down to scoop up Zoe and set her on Will's lap.

Will stays still, confused, and just hesitantly pats at his dogs—the ones that are here, anyway—as he tries to observe the rest of his surroundings

He has on soft grey shorts and a t-shirt, fitted loosely. At different spots, he can see the blood that has seeped through. His ankles, propped up on an ottoman on top of soft pillows, are various shades of purple and swollen twice their size where he can see under the bandages—proper ones, not underwear. So are his wrists, underneath where the bloody chains sat. He's just about to lift his hands to his neck when he notices the IV in the back of his right hand. He follows it up to the unlabelled bag of fluid hanging just out of reach and then finally looks around the room.

He doesn't see his other dogs. Winston should be at his side.

He seems to be in some sort of sunroom, with windows that curve overhead and expose the expanse of the sky, partly cloudy and unobscured by any buildings. Instead, the sea stretches out, over what looks to be a cliff, though he can't tell how high it is from this angle. *Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Baltimore anymore,* he thinks bitterly. So much for his half-formed escape plan. Of course, Hannibal wouldn't be able to risk the police checking his own basement. Will assumes that this place isn't even connected to Hannibal's name, meaning very little hope for the police to look for him here.

"I thought you would be happy to sit in the sun since it's such a nice day," Hannibal says.

The chair he's sitting in is large and plush. Before him is a table with a tray of tea, that Hannibal begins pouring for him.

"I have given you some painkillers, is it sufficient?" Hannibal asks, pausing and looking up until Will nods. It hurts when Will moves, but more painkillers would make his head too foggy.

"Where are the rest of my dogs?" Will asks.

"Please eat, too. I have a simple spread so as not to upset your stomach too much." Hannibal lifts up the lid on a platter that looks to be mostly slices of meat.

Will takes a calming breath. "Doctor Lecter, where are the rest of my dogs?"

"With nice new families. Don't fret, I checked their backgrounds personally."

Will's stomach sinks, settling on the floor like a coin tossed in a wishing well.

"You… gave away my dogs?"

"I am in the process. They will be somewhere that you won't know so you don't hold onto hope for getting out of here, but further, you won't have to worry about them. I assure you, they are going to capable owners."

Will's bottom lip trembles at the thought of never seeing his other dogs again. Max. Ellie. *Winston.* Gone. And this is probably the last time he'll be able to see the rest of his dogs, who are being so sweet and attentive trying to lick his wounds clean. These are *his* dogs, *his* pack, pretty much his entire world in his little farmhouse, being picked off one by one and separated.

“I know it hurts to think about. Hang on to that grief; you *must* grieve for what is changed and what is lost. I am not telling you to get over your dogs; I’m telling you to hurt for them, ache for them, and mourn your old life and everyone you knew for the beauty that it was, all for reasons that will become clear very soon. I am optimistic that you will understand in due time, and it is also important that you avoid targeting all of your emotions into anger at me. It’s pain that will set you free. We will work on it. You may consider it a radical kind of therapy.”

Will nudges Zoe off of his lap and swats the other dogs away from licking his legs when Hannibal comes toward him with his tea.

“You will need to say goodbye to simple pleasures like good food and drink, too, but I can’t bring myself to deprive you of everything yet. I very much want the pleasure of indulgence for those that I care about, but with you, there is something that I want even more than that.”

Hannibal bends down, smiling and passing Will his tea. Will meets his gaze for a moment before smashing the teacup up toward Hannibal’s face with all of the strength and rage that he can muster. Some of the hot water sloshes over his legs and he sucks in a breath out of pain but he watches in satisfaction as Hannibal recoils from the boiling tea that hit his face.

This is his chance. He rips out the IV with a wince. He lunges forward, ignoring the way his body protests and aches for rest, and pushes Hannibal onto the ground. He half catches himself, ready to pounce up again, when Will grabs the teapot and throws that down on him as hard as he can, sending more boiling water splashing. Hannibal doesn’t make a noise, out of distress or anger or anything, so Will can’t tell if he’s actually hurt him or if Hannibal just doesn’t respond much to pain.

Will tries to stand up on his injured ankles. He almost instantly falls forward as they fail to support him. He hears barking and turns around to catch Jack growling aggressively at Hannibal, protecting Will. Zoe joins in quickly but doesn’t seem to know what she’s barking at.

“Good dogs,” Will says and pushes himself up to limp away.

He finds his way out of the house and falls immediately into the cold grass. He picks himself up again and forces himself to move, putting most of his weight onto his left ankle. He can

feel his bones moving around and the bandages don't offer any support at all. He falls twice more before he finds himself near the cliff, and sprawls out on the ground, completely spent, only a couple of feet from the ledge. He isn't sure why he ran here when he could have tried to find a vehicle or something.

Maybe he has given up hope. Had he meant to throw himself off the ledge? He army-crawls forward until he can see below, down a much larger drop than he had imagined down to crashing waves and sharp rocks. He rolls on his side and looks back to find the dogs sniffing at him curiously, trying to lick his swollen ankles, and Hannibal walking casually toward him.

He's not going to kill himself. It's not even a matter of self-preservation at this point. He hardly cares if he dies; some part of him always knew he'd die young, and that he would die suffering. He has a purpose first, though. He needs to kill Hannibal.

He glares up at Hannibal, who has a squinting right eye and red-burned skin. He comes and sits next to Will to look out at the sea, and gives a piece of sausage to his dogs that eat it up greedily. Traitors, Will thinks, but not without fondness for his dogs.

Will whines and groans, his ankles throbbing like the fires of hell are trying to rip out of his feet. A number of cuts have started stinging and leaking from his falls. He urges himself to get up and fight, but his body won't move. Hannibal smiles amusedly at his struggling.

"When you catch your breath, will you throw me off the cliff?" Hannibal asks teasingly. Will wishes he'd go back to sounding like an impersonal psychopath rather than Hannibal: Will's friend and therapist, who has a gentle, calming voice and the same sense of humour as him.

"If you think I'm going to sit here and joke with you like old times you're fucking crazy," Will says.

With that, moisture starts pooling in his eyes with an onslaught of emotions. He wipes it quickly.

“Your pain *is* beautiful, it punctuates every part of you,” Hannibal says. “As if your empathy magnifies your emotions like the echo of your voice around a large room. I’m sure your whole life has been punctuated by suffering; it must almost feel like this was inevitable in some strange way, doesn’t it?”

Will ignores the fact that it does feel entirely appropriate that his life would come to this after all the luck he’s had. “That’s why you’re doing this? You want to see me in pain? Want to get off to it?”

Hannibal looks immediately disappointed, almost affronted that Will would suggest such a thing. Will tenses instinctively. Rule number one: Be nice to your captor, or you’re dinner. Literally, in this situation, he assumes.

“Will, I had hoped you would do better at figuring it out. If anyone could, it’d be you.”

Will pulls Buster close to hug him.

“Maybe it’s harder to think of myself as the victim. I don’t put myself in the shoes of the victims.”

“Then don’t.” Hannibal leans forward attentively. “Put yourself into my shoes.”

Will leans forward to nearly meet Hannibal in the middle.

“Narcissist,” he whispers cruelly. Annoyingly, Hannibal mostly looks amused.

“You will figure it out, Will, because that is what you do. Can you truly stand not trying to know? Can you stand not fighting for justice? Here I am torturing you and taking away any life for you to even return to, were you to ever be able to escape, which you won’t.”

Will lunges forward, going for Hannibal's throat. Hannibal tumbles back but then pushes them over by kicking out Will's feet, and Will scratches at Hannibal's burns until Hannibal pins him down. The dogs start barking like crazy but Hannibal rolls off of him before they can attack.

Will lifts up on one elbow, panting.

"Who was the meat?" Will demands.

Hannibal beams. "Perceptive boy, I knew you'd figure it out."

"*Who?* "

"The same cut as the last meal you had as a free man."

"The kind, gentle, intelligent animal?" Will lists, voice shaking. "You killed Alana?"

"She was a support for you, and someone you once imagined settling down with. Let go of the dreams, Will, there will be nothing for you outside of here."

"I imagined settling down with *you.* I should have dodged that bullet a long time ago."

"Your advances on me didn't surprise me and I admit I used that as leverage, but I am sorry if it came across like I never cared or reciprocated. On the contrary—"

"Don't. Those feelings of mine left instantly when I realized what you are."

Hannibal's smile angers Will. "Sure they did. Soon, you won't be able to avoid your emotions. All of that heartbreak will be at the surface. You will consume your loved ones and

take their pain and embody your grief, and it will fill you up like nothing else. Now, why don't you try and enjoy this time with your dogs? It won't last long. Here, all good things are coming to an end," Hannibal says, pushing himself up to standing.

"This may be your last time outside," Hannibal continues. "Why don't you enjoy it for a while? Later I will come get you to eat, and I hope you will cooperate unless you want the feeding tube for every one of your last meals."

Hannibal walks back to the house, and Will collapses onto the grass.

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Will stares at the sky for a while, letting himself cry and mope.

It's almost worse that he's sitting free in the outside world. There was no need for an escape plan. There is no escape here, and Hannibal doesn't even need to try and constrain him. He is already too injured to move.

He holds his dogs close, pulling them in with ear scratches and not minding when they lean on sensitive parts of his body. Everything is sensitive right now. They lick his wounds and his tears and he likes to think it's healing him. Out here without his IV, the pain starts to fire up again. He is endlessly aware of this coming to an end soon and every brush of wind makes him worry that Hannibal is coming back again.

He lays there for a long time, shivering in the cold air with just the heat of his dogs to warm him. The sun even starts to go down before Hannibal retrieves him, but it could never be long *enough.*

When Hannibal comes for him, Will fights him with all he's got the whole trip back to the house. He fights when Hannibal puts his dogs on leashes and leads them away. He fights as Hannibal tries to feed him his own friend and eventually he gets the feeding tube and chokes every inch it goes down and back out his throat.

“I knew you would fight me every step of the way. It is your nature. You underwent biochemical changes when you killed Hobbs, as we all do when we become killers, but I’m sure the potential was always bubbling at the surface ready to spill over. *That* is why I chose you. You understand the beauty of blood and death.”

“Let me be your partner then,” Will says. “If you want someone to understand you, then let me understand you as we kill people together. You wanted me to kill Hobbs, didn’t you?”

Hannibal looks almost solemn. “Maybe in another world. I do not doubt that your design, were you given the opportunity to kill, would have been radiant, and that I absolutely could have pushed you to it. I am simply too curious to pass this opportunity up. It is something else entirely that I want you to become.”

“Why does it have to be me? Get someone else, I'll help you,” Will says, thinking about all the ways he could overpower Hannibal if he was given a weapon.

Hannibal pushes Will back on the chair as if to say *get comfortable, you’ll be here a while.*

“Is that really your best try? Figure it out. You’ve been working on my cases for a long time.”

Will sits up again, despite the pain it causes.

“And if I refuse this, then you lose. You have been alone all your life because of how unique you are and all of a sudden you have realized how nice it would be to have someone understand you. Well boo-fucking-hoo, you’re going to be the one that dies with no one.”

“You must know that dogs sometimes seek solitary in order to die alone. It can be preferred. You will not die alone, I will be by your side staring into your eyes at the moment that your heart flutters out like a bird.”

“Not if I don’t kill you first.”

“That is true.”

“At least try to bargain with me, then maybe I’ll play this game.”

“Understanding me will benefit you because you will be the beauty of it, too.”

Will looks away and refuses to speak. Hannibal doesn’t try. They sit in silence for a long while as the world outside grows dark. Will sinks back into the chair, grateful for the comfort, and his eyes start to droop and soon he settles into sleep.

When he opens his eyes again, he’s shackled in the basement and Hannibal is pulling on his chains, and Will screams.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal tortures him incessantly. Chamber music plays and fresh flowers get replaced by more flesh flowers. The torture turns to beatings as his wounds start to heal, and the beatings open his old wounds. Hannibal is methodical as always, hard but somehow hesitant hits to Will's face and torso. It doesn't stop Will from being bruised and swollen by the end, hurting from the inside out. Hannibal takes more pieces of his flesh, and Will has no doubt that he wants to taste his fear. Once, Hannibal even bites it off of him.

He gets water every once in a while, and even fewer times than that, he gets a tube forced down his throat and watches through blurry eyes as Hannibal rolls up slices of meat and pushes it down the tube with a rod, topping it off with a pill that is supposedly curing him while Hannibal slowly kills him. He wishes a fever would overtake him instead. He wishes he'd lose time and forget what has been done to him.

One time, Will reaches out to scratch Hannibal back with his nails that have had time to grow out, and in response, Hannibal breaks a few of his fingers. He takes them in his hand and cracks backward one by one, *crack crack crack,* until Will cries out. It reminds him of standing in that motel room, what felt like a lifetime ago, and feeling almost giddy when Hannibal cracked his joints, wondering if he was right to assume it was flirting.

Hannibal doesn't talk to him down here, even though he seemed to have a million things to say upstairs. The only words he speaks are to praise Will after each session. Will hates that he looks forward to it.

He knows he's going crazy when the next thing to come downstairs isn't human. First, he hears the sound of hooves along the floor, and then he sees a dark figure that must be 10 feet tall. He realizes that it's the antlers that reach to the ceiling, long, spindly, and sharp. He's seen this creature before. It comes toward him with a blank expression.

It lifts Will up in the air by his throat, pinning him against the wall, and then starts scratching at his skin, drawing blood with its sharp claws. It scratches a cut so deep into his face that it goes through his cheek and into his mouth. After, it leans in until its face is inches away from Will's, and smiles to express its pride.

As it walks away, Will says, “Wait. I know who you are.”

Hannibal walks back in its place, still monstrous, and waits.

“The Chesapeake Ripper. The Copycat. The Crucifier. God knows what else. No diagnosis fits you, you’re… probably more sane than most. You have an archaic ideology, and you think that death and suffering are beautiful. You like that I can understand you, and you see yourself in me in some ways.”

Hannibal kneels in front of him.

“And what am I doing with you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do, I have given you all of the information that you need.”

Hannibal moves to leave and Will calls out, “A martyr! That’s what you said in the motel room. You’re making me a martyr.”

Hannibal comes back and unclips Will’s restraints one by one, then lifts Will with little difficulty.

Will rests on his shoulder, too weak to deny himself a simple indulgence while he’s suffering so much. Besides, Hannibal still smells nice.

He is taken to a sitting room where Hannibal gives him a glass of water and returns with a tray of meat, cheese, and fruit that Will starts nibbling at. It’s been a long time since he’s tasted something other than the plastic of the feeding tube. Besides, Hannibal looks pleased

that he's eating. Enough so that he brings more food and tea that soothes his perpetually sore throat.

Hannibal looks at him expectantly and Will can't deny the urge to please. He can use this to his benefit. He can get closer and fake his acceptance to get a chance to kill Hannibal.

"A martyr usually suffers for a political or religious belief, but it isn't the cause that interests you, though you find the religious imagery beautiful. You want something symbolic; all of the pain and none of the motivation. It is a modern and almost scientific view of martyrdom: how much can a person take before their suffering reaches religious levels?"

Hannibal strokes his cheek and looks almost emotional at the idea that Will understands.

"Your other victims died or went insane, didn't they?" Will asks. "They couldn't get to the stage that you wanted them to, and they couldn't tell you how they felt."

"Most of them began hallucinating, and those hallucinations took over their lives. It was cockroaches, for the last one. I had to restrain Miriam from ripping off her own skin."

Will thinks about the hallucination he began to have before and decides that he needs to hide that insanity from Hannibal just in case he thinks he's too far gone.

"Then maybe it isn't just pain itself but the mindset of a martyr and that motivation they need to transcend?" Will says.

"Exactly, and why it is of utmost importance that you can understand and strive for this goal with me."

Will feels a bit nauseous at the idea that Will would work with Hannibal to torture himself.

“You gave up your freedom for me. Mine and Alana’s disappearances were too closely connected to you, that you had to run to this new location. You cannot return to your life in Baltimore, or to your old acquaintances. You let the world see you, just enough. That is how important this goal is to you.”

“It’s how important *you* are to me.”

“Because you think I can take it and… and what?”

“And *transcend,* ” Hannibal says, promptly standing up and walking out of the room with a pep in his step. He returns quickly with a stack of worn, old books and documents to which Will thinks *of course.*

“March 1905, Fou-Tchou-Li was found guilty for the murder of Prince Ao-Han-Ouan and sentenced to the ‘slow death,’ *Lingchi,* of which a photographer managed to capture a rare moment before death. Look here, what is most striking of this moment is the bliss in his expression. Those that were subject to death by a thousand cuts were given opium to prolong their torture, and what happens in response is complete ecstasy at their own destruction. You can’t tell me that martyrdom was invented by religion. These are undoubtedly the most popular pictures among collectors of hideous arcana online, the only photos that are shared more than the bootlegs of my own kills.”

Will stares at the man in the grainy photograph, his chest a mess of raw flesh and dripping blood, and at his face, staring towards the heavens.

“He is still *alive,*" Hannibal emphasizes, already flipping to a different page of a different book and pulling up other documents. "Now, the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, he looks much the same, yes? An arrow through his gut and an expression of pleasure. Now, look at this photo. Terminal stages of cancer, the morphine doesn’t work anymore.” Hannibal brings the photo closer to Will. “Look at her eyes. She is still alive. What does she see?”

Hannibal flips to a different photo.

“I took this photo myself when I was still a surgeon. This man was stuck in the aftermath of a car crash for nine hours before turning up at my hospital, those mangled limbs not enough to kill him. I noticed the expression on his face immediately and I was enamoured, but I was not able to be alone with him. It was torture to disrupt his current state, but I could not get rid of the other doctors or else I would have caused too much suspicion. And yet, he was trying to speak. In that state, eyes seeing nothing of the present room, and still trying to express himself. By the time I managed to get myself alone with him, he was no longer lucid enough to speak, and he died not too long later. I quit my profession after that, citing my inability to save him, when in reality it was not knowing what he was trying to say that kept me up at night. I need to know what they see.”

Hannibal looks expectantly at Will.

“You want to get me to that state and then tell you what I see,” Will says.

“Precisely.”

“You should enter that state yourself, instead of torturing everyone else.”

“Oh, Will, it isn’t the pain or indignity that scares me. The experience appeals to me, but I would be too hasty of me.”

“I’m just your guinea pig then, huh?”

“You are so much more. I am giving you a gift, though you can’t see it yet. I want to see it with clear eyes before I experience it one day, far in the future.”

“That look on their faces…” Will’s eyes flick down to the open pages and photographs, and he quickly looks away from the admittedly unsettling expressions. “You could be seeing anything. Maybe the pain was too much and their brains shut down into a dissociative state.”

Hannibal leans forward and looks Will in the eyes. “You lock someone in a dark room, they begin to suffer. You feed that suffering, methodically, systematically and coldly, and make it last. Your subject goes through a number of states. After a while, their trauma, that small, easily opened crack makes them see things that don’t exist. They enter into a dissociative state, as you say, because they cannot handle the pain. People no longer envisage suffering. That’s how the world is. There are nothing but victims left. I have had many victims. I have seen them in pain, and I have seen them struggling, and I have made them into art with a disregard for what they were feeling. Blood and flesh were the elements that I sculpted and used as sustenance, but this is much deeper; it is spiritual. Martyrs are very rare, something else, and they are extraordinary creatures. They survive pain; they survive total deprivation. They bear all the sins of the earth, they give themselves up, they transcend themselves. Do you understand? They are transfigured.”

Will finds himself shaking, but he nods. He understands far too well. He almost wishes he didn’t understand Hannibal.

Hannibal flips through some other books, showing Will similar photographs and paintings.

“I would much rather take you to a museum to see the art in person, but it is not possible now, of course,” Hannibal says.

“What, because you made me look monstrous with cuts all over my body?” Will asks, unable to keep the trembling anger out of his voice.

“You look like a work of art,” Hannibal replies.

“I’m injured, and it’s ugly.”

“Is it time to go back down to your restraints now?”

Will sinks back into the sofa that is so much nicer to sit on than the cold floor.

“Stop, hey, what is it? You don’t want me to be rude?”

Hannibal pulls him up and Will tugs back with his weight.

“You know I’m too smart for this, okay? Captives trying to appease their captors after being punished for disobedience, I know the whole shebang. Let’s skip that part and just tell me what you want and I’ll go along with it.”

“Oh, Will, you should know that that doesn’t apply here. I am looking for your distress, not your obedience.”

“Won’t you miss me when I’m too broken to speak? When I’m actually gone? Who will you have to speak to you that understands you?”

Hannibal does pause at that. Will keeps talking quickly.

“And do you really want that? All for this?”

Hannibal sighs. “I know what I want.”

Will holds his hand and tries to look as genuine as he can, despite currently daydreaming about leaning up a few more inches to rip Hannibal’s throat out with his teeth.

Hannibal strokes his face again. It’s the place that Will has the least amount of cuts. He wonders if it’s because Hannibal thinks he’s beautiful. He wonders if he can use that. His heart pangs at the idea. Hannibal *could* have had him. Will *wanted* that.

“My feelings are getting in the way of committing to what I am trying to do,” Hannibal says.

Will nods in understanding, touching the hand on his face.

“And I won’t let that happen anymore.”

Will’s expression drops. Hannibal lifts him up, and when Will fights too much, he resorts to half dragging him on the floor.

“You fucking—you *will* face a reckoning, I won’t let—”

It hurts his bony hips and legs when he is dragged down the stairs. How has he lost so much weight? How long has he been here? He should have been counting, the pills or the food or his bowel movements, *something.* For all he knows it could have been years. He doesn’t know the extent to which his brain is protecting him. All of his hair has grown out, and so have his nails, his curls are getting closer to his shoulders. Enough time has passed for him to scrape off his scabs and find lumpy, sensitive scar tissue beneath.

He’s crying when he gets to his chains. He can handle pain, as he’s proven day after day, but it’s suddenly hard to reconcile that he’s slowly dying and will never gain the strength or opportunity to get revenge. It will only get worse.

Hannibal returns after a moment with an electrical razor and grabs Will’s hair.

“I was fond of your hair. Hair is a symbol of personality, it gives us identity. It showed my weakness, that I wanted to hold on to you.”

“You can hold onto me,” Will says quietly as Hannibal starts to shave off his hair. He doesn’t care about it, but he knows Hannibal is right, that psychologically, his hair let him keep some marker of identity that he could still feel.

Will curls up his knees and doesn’t fight Hannibal as he shaves his hair.

“You know, I don’t even believe in God,” Will says, not even sure why he feels the need to say this aloud. Maybe he needs to know that someone can still hear him, and realize he has his own thoughts.

Hannibal only hums, maybe a bit disappointed.

“What I believe in is closer to science fiction, that there might be an infinite number of parallel universes in which everything that can happen, does happen. Maybe I have free will right here and now, but it still means that this had to happen some way or another, whether it was my experience or if it happened in another world. What does it say psychologically that I could be jealous of other, parallel selves of mine? I reckon I got one of the worst worlds here, right? Reaching the limit of my pain, taking away my power, dehumanizing me... In other worlds, I beat you. I killed you or locked you up. In even more worlds, maybe we were at least somehow happy with each other. I know the potential that I have. I think we could have had something, right?”

“It is a comforting thought,” Hannibal agrees, sounding a bit distant.

“The only comfort I get anymore is considering other worlds.”

Hannibal finishes buzzing his hair and then brushes the fallen bits off of his shoulders.

“You have to give in, Will. If you want this to end, you need to completely give yourself over to the pain and let go of the menial comforts of life and dreams, that is what it means to be a martyr, to give your mind, body, and soul. I apologize if I have not been pushing you enough.”

Will grabs his arm. “I want it to stop. I’m not your person.”

“It won’t stop, so do not try to understand me simply to placate me. Understand so that you can do it for yourself.”

With that, Hannibal pushes himself up and leaves.

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He doesn’t realize at first that his inner voice sounds like Hannibal. He’s spent so much time trying to imagine conversations with Hannibal that he could instigate and lead to his benefit that Hannibal’s steady voice began to grow more frequent and blur with his own until it was the only thing left. The voice tells him when he needs to do things and contests with him about any odd thing. Will thinks he’s going to go crazy like this, here in the dark where he’s either thinking about how much he’s aching and in pain or hearing Hannibal drone on in his head.

The main signs that Will has been left alone for an extended period of time are that Hannibal leaves him with a large bottle of water and his chamber pot doesn’t get emptied. He’s glad for these physical markers because otherwise time starts to blend and blur and all he’s left with is an aching feeling of loneliness.

He’s always been rather lonely, and it was often by choice. He lived alone as soon as he could afford it and even before then, he was alone most of the time. Friends and colleagues and casual lovers came and went, and he usually sought solitude, until he was known as the antisocial teacher, the person that you didn't bother in the staff lounge. What people didn’t know is he very much craved connection, just not with the people he happened to know. Somewhere inside he still believed that one day he might meet someone that he could connect with, that understood him and who he felt safe with like no other. He was enough of a realist to know it was a fairytale dream and that there were no soulmates in real life, let alone many people alive who could even stand to dig into his brain. It didn’t stop him from having nights where he’d lay wrapped up in his sheets and comfort himself with the idea that he might not always be alone.

It sickens him that he wishes Hannibal would come back to give him company. His voice inside of his head is driving him up the wall and yet he wants Hannibal to be close to him. He knows the signs of Stockholm Syndrome. He’s not going to think about it.

He hears footsteps coming down the stairs sometimes, and when he looks over, he can see the tall, monstrous figure with antlers that nearly reach the ceiling. He can feel its breath on the back of his neck. He refuses to look at it for too long. He remembers what Hannibal said, that

victims start to see something else and shut down because they can't survive the violence. *Martyrs* survive what is done to them. If Will breaks, then this will all be for nothing—

He doesn't want to think that way, though. It's Hannibal's voice in his head. This isn't Will's path in life, it's just Hannibal's justification for ruining him.

Claws trickle down his back, not too hard as to break the skin, but Will imagines that red marks are left in their wake as they travel around his skin, threatening.

"How do you do it?" Will asks. He hears his voice aloud, though he doesn't feel his lips moving.

Do what?

"How do you stop from being afraid? I'm *always* afraid it seems. I don't want to be afraid anymore."

He can detect the fond amusement in Hannibal's tone as if he's surprised that Will hasn't figured it out. *You just have to give in. Give in to the pain and the blood, accept it for the beauty you know it holds.*

It takes a few minutes for Will to convince himself to turn over to face the monster. The monster comes over him, covering him, holding him close, and Will accepts it until his heart slows from a pumping beat to his resting rhythm.

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The monster keeps him company. He holds Will and he digs into his flesh and whispers encouragement. Will relaxes when footsteps come near now. He lifts up his arms to draw the monster near but startles when instead, his clasps are unlocked.

Hannibal helps him out of the uncomfortable restraints and Will feels a bit more empty without them holding him in.

“Come here, I am grateful for your patience.”

Hannibal carries him upstairs and runs him a bath. He cleans him gently in water that makes Will’s skin prickle with warmth and then dries him in with a soft towel. He helps Will into a suit after, which feels strange and foreign on Will’s body. Too human.

“What’s going on?” Will asks.

“It’s time for your last supper,” Hannibal says, smiling satisfactorily.

“Oh.”

Hannibal helps Will to the dining room. The table seats twelve and the amount of food on the table suggests that twelve people might have been invited, but there are only two place settings at the end of the table. Hannibal announces each dish, all various cuts of meat, and gives Will a small serving of each one.

Will eats, bite after bite, nodding perfunctorily to show his satisfaction but he doesn’t taste a single thing. He even asks for seconds.

Hannibal looks beautiful in his suit. It’s more flashy than what Will usually sees him wear, but he reckons he couldn’t stand out too much in daily life before people thought he was strange. It doesn’t matter anymore. He has begun living his truth at last. For Will.

Will feels tipsy and sated after only a couple of sips of wine. He chews slowly and lets his eyes close, though he isn’t actually tired, just relaxed. He doesn’t even notice it’s over until Hannibal takes his plate away.

Hannibal holds out his hand to him when he's back.

"Dinner and a show?" Hannibal jokes.

Will struggles to stand up without help. His ankles haven't healed, let alone healed *properly* after being dropped on so many times, and he nearly tips over a few times but doesn't even wince at the pain shooting up his legs. He takes one step after another, following Hannibal's path.

Hannibal takes him to tall windows looking out upon the front of the house.

"Before I had imagined I would keep you in the dark of the basement, but I thought it would be appropriate to do this outside. We must return to our baser natures."

Will stumbles as he moves close to the window to view the scene outside. He feels like he's been transported to another world.

Hannibal leads him outside onto the uneven ground. The crash of waves from below the cliffs can just barely be heard from here. It's cold, too, and Will pulls his arms around him until Hannibal gently unwinds them and starts to strip his clothes down until Will is wearing nothing at all.

Will looks warily at the table of tools to the side but allows Hannibal to lift his hands to the arms of the large cross, accepting that the time for him to any morsel of peace is over. He screws up his face when Hannibal hammers the nails between the two bones in his forearm to pin him to the board. He always thought that he might one day reach a certain threshold of pain where it no longer felt like anything, but it seems like he's only more aware of it. There was no chance for any of his wounds to heal. Cuts line his body in bright red, snaking up his limbs and toward his heart in a symmetrical manner. His skin is mottled in different colours with bruises. His ankles are broken and his wrists are sprained and there's a harsh line across his throat where the restraint tightens around his neck each day. He allows Hannibal to pin him to the cross and then drop him so his bodyweight pulls down on his wrists.

He hangs down, his body leaning forward so that he faces the corpses on the ground that are presented as if praying to him with dead eyes. He looks between them and feels the first tears come down his face.

“Now you see that there is nothing for you in this world, no friends or loved ones. They all wait for you on the other side. I will give you that vision,” Hannibal says. Stepping in front of the view of Will’s friends. Alana, Jack, Beverly, Price, Zeller, *Abigail.* Will never would have been able to save them, because he was never going to save himself. They are missing limbs and their stomachs and heads are cut open, and Will knows exactly where that meat went. It doesn't matter if they had other lives and other loved ones. They all had a string to Will that needed to be severed.

“Abigail...” Will mutters, shaking his head solemnly.

“I had planned to put Abigail in your spot at first. Health and wellbeing are more than physical, it’s made of social connection and psychological stability, meaning the trauma and isolation that she has experienced has put her a step above the rest, if only I could stretch it out and triangulate her experience with physical pain, then she would transcend. But *you*, with you I realized one more thing, and that is that you might be the one to understand my design. Your life has been punctuated by loss and trauma, too. It was easy to identify the last few bits of belonging that you had and get rid of them.”

“You missed one,” Will says breathlessly.

Hannibal’s eyebrows twitch slightly.

“There’s still you. I cared about you most in the end. You’ll have to kill yourself to truly leave me with nothing,” Will says.

The wind whips Hannibal’s hair across his forehead but otherwise, he is completely still for a long time. When he finally moves again, he presses his lips to Will’s, just for a moment before stepping back.

“Then I will. If you are still alive by the time I am done with you, then I will send us both over the cliffside.”

Will smiles deviously. “Deal.”

Hannibal hooks Will up to an IV and Will follows the tube to the bag of red fluid.

“Abigail had the same blood type as you. She will help to keep you alive. No one has survived through this stage before.” Hannibal picks up a hatchet, and then promptly buries it into Will’s shoulder with a *thwack*.

Will cries out, and then speaks through his teeth as he remembers the old murder tableaus. “The wound man?”

“Yes. That’s how Miriam Lass found me. It was unfortunate that she lost herself before I could do the same to her.”

One by one, Hannibal picks up instruments to use on him. Knives, spears, and swords of varying sizes, one through his gut that makes him moan in pain for a few minutes. A number of arrows that Hannibal stands back to shoot at him with precision. A club shatters his right shoulder. A dagger pierces the side of his chest and he’s sure it’s only millimetres away from his heart. Another knife digs into his cheek and lodges in his gums. He stays alive. He keeps breathing. He might be screaming, he's not sure. In his head, Hannibal encourages him each step of the way.

It seems to go on for hours, and then slowly, his eyes begin to lift up from the dead eyes of his friends around him and point to the sky. He’s surprised to see that the sun has gone down and only the moon is out. The stars surrounding it grow brighter and brighter until all he can see is dazzling light shining down on him. It’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen and he can only stare, mesmerized, as the scene in front of him morphs and changes before his eyes. The pain changes in that moment, and his heartbeat slows.

A final dagger pierces his shoulder, and he doesn't so much as flinch. Hesitantly, Hannibal steps back to look at him, and Will can sense the finality in his posture.

“I did it,” Will says, victorious. “I survived it.”

“You are perfect,” Hannibal whispers in what sounds like almost disbelief. Will feels his pride magnified to an impossible amount.

“My blood is so black in the moonlight.”

“It is, it’s wonderful. Tell me… what do you see?”

Will laughs in euphoric glee. “All of the other worlds. Every moment of every one.”

Hannibal steps in closer, his eyes never leaving Will’s expression.

“Tell me.”

“You have to join me to see.”

Hannibal takes out his IV and works out the nails keeping Will pinned to the cross, and Will collapses to the ground. Hannibal picks him up bridal style and takes him to the cliffside, where he puts him down on his feet and lets him see the view one last time, the dazzling light of the other side calling to him, and all the knowledge of the universe suddenly inside of him. Will sways on his feet, determined not to die now, even as blood drips down his entire body. There’s one last thing he must do, and he wants to be alive to see it.

He lifts his arms around Hannibal’s neck and pulls them toward the drop. He doesn’t have the strength to force it, but he doesn’t need it, because Hannibal lets him fall. They both drop toward the light, and he thinks it's beautiful.

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter, I reference real Lingchi photos that are described in the *Hannibal* book as you can see here for chapter 8. Other dialogue from this chapter comes straight from the movie Martyrs!

If you have made it this far, thank you so much for reading!

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